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ABSTRACT

The third and final paper in a series on underachievement presents a case study of a 12-year-old underachiever. The boy's family situation, psychological test results, and reactions to treatment (a combination of behavior modification, psychotherapy, and environmental manipulation) are recounted. (CL)

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PAPER III

CASE STUDY

# THE DIAGNOSIS, TREATMENT, AND FOLLOW-UP OF AN UNDERACHIEVING CHILD

by

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## CASE STUDY

## THE DIAGNOSIS, TREATMENT, AND FOLLOW-UP OF AN UNDERACHIEVING CHILD

### A THE PROBLEM

John, aged twelve, was typical of a large number of similar cases one meets more and more frequently. Before proceeding on the detailed approach and analysis of the case it is necessary to see the problems John has in connection with parental expectations and the school which he attended.

John was a product of the mid-twentieth century, - a period of affluence and opportunity in western societies; a period of strong competitiveness in everyday life, be it business or education. John's parents were both successful professionally. His father, a successful barrister, had fought his way past a long series of obstacles. The mother also had succeeded in reaching the post of a university lecturer.

John was the oldest of four children. All, with the exception of John, showed promise of following in the footsteps of their parents by above average performance academically.

The presenting of a single case should always be viewed as being of limited value unless general tendencies relevant to other similar cases become apparent. We are all well aware that this should not invalidate the view that each case differs from any other and should be viewed as a unique entity requiring a specific therapeutic approach based on the requirements of the case.

In addition to viewing the environment impinging upon John from the point of the school, parents and peers, I will present the development of the case as a result of a combination of behaviour and psychotherapy.

### No. 1 Parental View

John was accompanied by his mother, a smartly dressed and well-spoken woman of 38. She sounded desperate as she explained:

"I don't know what to do about John: the more my husband and I insist he do his homework and "pull up his socks" in school, the less we seem to get out of him. We have tried everything; we have threatened him, deprived him and even hit him, but nothing seems to work. The

next morning we all try to help him finish his homework; otherwise, he would get to school without having done it at all."

The mother was asked whether John was ever praised for what he had done.

"There really isn't anything to praise him for", she said. "He is so slovenly, slow and lackadaisical, he just doesn't seem to care". She added, "Compared to his younger brothers, however, he is more likeable and easy going. The only thing John likes to do is to play his record player as loud as possible, disturbing everyone in the house. To give you an example: homework that would take most boys half-an-hour takes John three to four hours. The only thing he will eventually be able to do is labouring, the way he is going, and what a shame that would be."

The parental view may be summarised as follows:-

(1) John was poorly motivated and lacked determined effort in relation to his school work, and for this reason he was slow in doing his assignments.

(2) There was a poor relationship between himself and his parents, and this appeared to be centred on his academic work. It was not possible to establish whether this proceeded or followed John's lack of application.

(3) The parents did not accept John as an individual, but rather, as an instrument whereby they could extend their own ambitions. They fluctuated between disappointment at John's poor attainment, because they expected much more of him, and the tendency to expect nothing from him at all, as expressed by their feeling that he would be capable only of becoming a labourer.

(4) They compared him unfavourably with his brighter and more motivated younger brothers.

No. 2 School's View

John attended a private school which was noted for the high standard it set. The school felt it had a duty to educate each child and to attain certain standards, and in John's case there was no exception. In fact, knowing the profession and social-standing of the parents, the school felt itself especially duty bound to push John in an effort to direct him according to his parental expectations. From the school's point of view John was lazy, did more and more sloppy work and would never partake in school sporting activities if he could get out of doing so. According to the headmaster:

to be disinterested and lazy, and he was heartily disliked by his class-mates".

We may therefore say:-

(1) The school felt John was underachieving because he was lazy or lacked drive.

(2) John was poorly adjusted to his peers.

(3) There was a tendency towards all-round deterioration rather than improvement.

No. 3 John's View

John was obese and generally unattractive and knew it. He presented the picture of a youthful version of Falstaff, slouching in his chair and grinning from embarrassment rather than pleasure. He appeared to be waiting for the expected admonishment from the psychologist when first making contact with him. When asked how he liked school, John merely replied, "It's all right". When asked about his favourite subjects, he replied, "Geography".

It was at this point that treatment might be said to have begun, but before going into the details, knowledge gained subsequently through a number of meetings with him must be summarised:

(1) John felt extreme pressure from all sides,

(a) His parents were alternately angry with him and nagging him about his school work. It appeared he would never satisfy them.

(b) The masters at his school seemed to be forever harassing him. Only rarely did he receive encouragement or praise for his work.

(c) He had no real friends; the other children made fun of him, and because he refused to fight, even smaller boys attacked him.

(2) John consequently experienced strong feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness. He was even more anxious about the future than he was about the present.

(a) He found the school work too difficult and his assignments too heavy. Somehow he could never quite catch up with the work, and this caused him even greater anxiety.

(b) He knew he was unpopular and could not understand why the other children failed to like him, despite the fact that he was always kind towards them, even sharing his sweets.

(c) Physically, he felt extremely inferior. The smallest boys were able to punch him and push him around, and although he was raging with anger at the humiliation, his retaliation

was feeble and clumsy. The result was always the laughter and derision of other boys. Because of this he was very unhappy in school because he wished so much to be popular.

## B DIAGNOSIS AND PROGNOSIS

### 1. Testing and Results

As a result of psychological testing, the following was established:
(a) John's intelligence was average, but his ability in the basic subjects, particulary Reading and Arithmetic, was retarded by about a year.
(b) According to personality testing, there was much evidence that John had an excessively high number of neurotic symptoms, both on objective and projective tests. To the picture, (Boy and Violin), picture one of the Thematic Apperception Test, John responded:

> "A boy who is poor and wants to play the violin, and the result is that he becomes a great violinist. He feels sad because there is nobody to teach him. He is wondering what is going to happen in the future. He is wondering how he is going to get a violin teacher."

Most of the responses to the other pictures resulted in rich fantasies, feelings of depression and despair and escapism, as well as anxiety and violence.

On the Sentence Completion Test, ambivalent attitudes to his parents were evident, and there was confirmation concerning John's anxiety about school, other children, tendencies to depression, insecurity and sibling rivalry.

On the whole, a great number of aggressive, paranoid and depressive themes were expressed on the Thematic Apperception Test, even to stimuli cards where there was no obvious negative meaning.

### 2. Observation and Treatment

(a) Summary Progress Report of John:

1. **First week.** John lounged about: "I don't feel like doing any work", he said. He talked to the psychologist about his inability to get on at school, and about his difficulty in getting down to do his work. He seemed to be expecting a miracle to be performed, whereby he would be transformed

into an able and motivated boy. "I seem to play around with things for a long time and then finally get down to it, and then I have to rush." He was shown Card 1 of the Thematic Apperception Test and asked to talk about it. Responses were sparse and inhibited initially. Later, he was asked to write about the card. He said, "I don't think I can think of anything. It's too much hard work. Give me an easy one." By the time ten minutes had passed he had hardly begun to write anything. This was before the response made earlier on the TAT card 1.

2. First month. An incentive procedure was introduced. A graph was constructed showing John's progress session by session. Recorded were the number of words written for each ten minute period and also the number of spelling mistakes made. As a result, John felt happier and happier in the Psychologist's company and liked coming. He was praised and encouraged with each effort. He wrote while watching a stop watch ticking away the seconds, and for perhaps the first time he was made aware of the many seconds contained in a minute. The movement of the second hand of the watch itself gave urgency to his efforts, and John began to waste less and less time dawdling and daydreaming and gave more and more time and effort to writing. The mother, who had brought John, watched the progress of the chart, and John was always eager to draw her attention to it and to the success he achieved. He desperately wanted her approval and praise.

At the beginning of each session, John discussed his problems of the week before, and received constructive advice and encouragement. His fantasy material showed signs of greater richness, enthusiasm and diversity as time progressed.

3. Second and Third Month. During this time a number of innovations were introduced:

(a) John was given nuts and sweets during the session. The object was to create as pleasant a working environment as possible while he was there. Indeed, John was always eager to come to the clinic by now.

(b) The period of each writing session was increased from 10 to 15 minutes, and then to 20 minutes and eventually half an hour. The objective was to increase his attention span and to create an environment which resembled that of the school and to provide him with tasks in which he could succeed. It was expected that the state of affairs would carry over into the classroom and increase his chances of completing homework more quickly and of a higher standard.

(c) In addition to the graph, other reinforcements and incentives

were introduced to sustain and even increase John's motivation as quickly as possible, and thus keep his performance at as high a level as possible. He was told that when he had completed the first 1,000 words he would receive a pencil as a special prize. John was not short of pencils, but the fact that it was a "special prize" impressed him. He was also told that at the completion of the first 2,000 words he would be rewarded with a small torch. The result was that John was highly motivated, and he reached the criteria of 2,000 words quickly.

His general demeanour had also begun to alter. He was less phlegmatic and appeared to work with a greater zest at the clinic. He was also eager to present his mother with the results of each session, and looked, on the whole, a much happier child.

The mother too had begun to change in her attitude towards John, and this, it was hoped, would also be transmitted to the father, who had been even less encouraging.

4. Third to Sixth Month. Progress was maintained, and the period of each writing session was increased to a regular twenty minutes of intensive and uninterrupted writing. Rapport and motivation continued to be good, and this had begun to carry over to the rest of his studies and homework. There were still times when John deteriorated slightly, but the overall tendency was towards improvement. Doing homework was considered to be less of a chore, and the daily assignments were completed with greater alacrity.

When productivity and attitude, as well as originality, had increased, it was felt that a certain amount of polish should be attained.

John's penmanship had begun to deteriorate in his effort to write down his thoughts as quickly as possible. This ease of flow and speed had been encouraged in the beginning, because it gave him a chance to release tensions and also helped him to improve his originality through quick written work.

He was next encouraged to work more carefully, even at the cost of some quantity of output. He was told that he would be rewarded especially for neatness and grammatical accuracy in the following manner:-

(1) He would be given two points instead of one for each word which was both correct and neatly written.

(2) The main rewards, such as pencil and small torch, would still be given as formerly.

As a result, as may be expected, quantity decreased slightly and quality increased, and this was considered to be desirable.

Before breaking off the treatment, it was felt that the relationship between the psychologist and the child must gradually be dissolved and, if possible, deflected towards his own father, with whom he had for some time had a poor relationship. The relationship had become very close between the boy and the psychologist because of the procedures and the success achieved. These were not the end itself, but certainly added to helping this child to feel increasingly motivated to do well. It was the learning procedure also, in fact, and the associated incentives which caused in John as great a change as the relationship and the "psychotherapy".

Of course, it would be difficult to ascribe percentage-wise which therapeutic approach contributed most. We must be satisfied that probably both approaches contributed something to the total improvement, and there was probably an interaction between them. The Thematic Apperception Test, besides providing much diagnostic material for the psychologist, also was a good vehicle upon which John could superimpose fantasies of aggression and anxiety and thereby find acceptable release for tensions, while revealing sources of anxiety and stresses. In addition to the T.A.T., other materials also provided a splendid number of topics for written work and this could be portrayed through the fantasy material of the T.A.T.

John was still making progress in every sphere, while he attended school. His parents continued to increase their willingness to accept him as he was and this made possible a good prognosis towards ultimately solving his problem.

John became increasingly less hostile to criticism and instructions, and developed a greater tendency to act the part of a child who belonged to a school. He joined in with a number of activities which he previously evaded or rebelled against. It must be said that academically John still under-achieved. This was, however, less the case than formerly. Both his Reading and Mathematics had improved because of his change in attitude. He was, however, limited by his approximately average intelligence.

It was clear that much of the fault lay with the way his parents and the school handled his problems. The school had refused to face the fact that John was of average intelligence, despite his parental background and the intelligence of both the parents. He was emotionally maladjusted rather than merely "difficult" in school. The excessively high academic aspirations of both parents and the school merely added stress where there was too much already.

## C ASSESSMENT OF RESULTS

The results of the treatment can only be measured by a long period of follow-up or by having used a control in the form of another boy theoretically equal in most respects to John. This is unlikely to be done and is at any rate unethical since every child has a right to expect to be helped with his problems and not be used in experiments such as this.

As therapists and clinicians we are often still prone to the fallacies of over-optimism and excessive pessimism in judging the outcome of a case. Of the case that has just been described, we may at best say:-

1. The patient had improved in some aspects of his academic work. His attainments were now more in keeping with his intellectual ability rather than below it.
2. John's attitudes towards school and school work had improved. He was also a happier-all-round boy than at the beginning. This was due to the fact that he could establish a good relationship with an adult and increasingly with his peers. He gradually realised that he could succeed under the right circumstances.
3. The relationship between John and his mother was much less tense. Although the mother had still not completely accepted John with all his limitations, she now saw these flaws with less severity. His relationship with his father was also better.
4. It had been decided to remove John from his present school and to send him to a more appropriate school setting, a boarding school where academic requirements were less high and where he could be safeguarded from the possibly re-erupting parental censures and excessively high expectations. This paid dividends, because he was now in the almost perfect environment for a boy with his intellectual ability.

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## D CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There was some indication that John was both emotionally and educationally better adjusted after treatment lasting about six months. The treatment combined behaviour modification, psychotherapy and environmental manipulation.

2. In order to safeguard the positive gains made, the parents were required to accept their own limitations. They accepted the decision to send John to a boarding school for children of average ability. This occurred after John began to make progress through the treatment he received.

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## FOLLOW UP

John was followed up ten years later, when he was twenty two and had left school after taking two 'O' levels with the greatest of difficulty. He was working in a lumber yard as a semi-skilled worker and seemed happy with his life. He was at the point of getting married to a nice girl from a good background. Her father was, in fact, the foreman of the yard where John worked.

John was mature and sensible. He was no longer overweight and seemed to delight in living life happily, having satisfied his own if not his parental ambitions. He was achieving appropriate to his intellectual ability and personal ambitions.

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